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ABSTRACT

The promise of education reform is that all children will receive a quality education. However, there are enormous challenges to reform, including resource inequities, an aging teaching force, and public doubts about school effectiveness. Moreover, school reform policies place enormous strain on teachers and students. Teachers need to implement new curricula and ensure that they are providing appropriate instruction. Students--including English language learners--must learn challenging content and pass statewide assessments in order to graduate in many states. These new demands coincide with the well-documented changing face of the U.S. student population. More teachers are responsible for the education of children from diverse backgrounds--children who speak little or no English upon arrival at school, children who may have had interrupted schooling in their home country, and children whose families may have had little exposure to the norms of U.S. schools. In general, the U.S. teaching force is not well prepared to help culturally diverse children succeed academically and socially, because preservice teacher preparation programs have not offered sufficient opportunities for learning how to teach culturally diverse students. As a result, many teachers have been learning on the job. Fillmore and Snow (2000) assert that teachers need an understanding of educational linguistics--how language impacts teaching and learning--to do their work well. They argue that knowledge about language will enhance teachers' practice in general, and in particular, it will aid them in teaching literacy. This digest focuses on principles and structures for professional development of practicing teachers that can help them gain the knowledge they need about language and on some challenges to overcome for providing good professional development opportunities. (Contains 11 references.) (VWL)

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Principles, Structures, and Challenges

NANCY CLAIR, CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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The promise of education reform is that all children will receive a quality education. But there are enormous challenges to reform, including resource inequities, an aging teaching force, and public doubts about school effectiveness. Moreover, school reform policies place enormous strain on teachers and students: Teachers need to implement new curricula and ensure that they are providing appropriate instruction. Students—including English language learners—must learn challenging content and pass statewide assessments in order to graduate in many states.

These new demands coincide with the well-documented changing face of the U.S. student population. More teachers are responsible for the education of children from diverse backgrounds—children who speak little or no English upon arrival at school, children who may have had interrupted schooling in their home country, and children whose families may have had little exposure to the norms of U.S. schools. In general, the U.S. teaching force is not well prepared to help culturally diverse children succeed academically and socially, because preservice teacher preparation programs have not offered sufficient opportunities for learning to teach culturally diverse students. As a result, many teachers have been learning on the job (Clair, 1995).

Fillmore and Snow (2000) assert that teachers need an understanding of educational linguistics—how language impacts teaching and learning—to do their work well. They argue that knowledge about language will enhance teachers' practice in general, and in particular, it will aid them in teaching literacy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and in working with English language learners (August & Hakuta, 1998). This Digest focuses on principles and structures for professional development of practicing teachers that can help them gain the knowledge they need about language and on some challenges to overcome for providing good professional development opportunities.

Language: A Central Component of Teachers' Work

Fillmore and Snow (2000) distinguish five teacher functions in which language is central. *Teachers are communicators*: They need to be able to communicate effectively and have strategies for understanding what students are saying. *Teachers are educators*: They are responsible for subject area instruction. They must also select educational materials and provide learning opportunities that promote second language acquisition for students who are learning English and that promote language development for native English speakers. They need to be able to distinguish language behavior that is developmentally predictable from that which is not and provide appropriate instructional intervention. *Teachers are evaluators* and their decisions have important consequences for students. There are far too many instances of students being placed in inappropriate educational programs because judgments of ability are influenced by misunderstandings of language behavior. *Teachers are educated people*: Information about language is essential to being a literate member of society. *Teachers are agents of socialization*. They play a central role in socializing children to the norms, beliefs, and communication patterns of school—and for immigrant children and native-born children from nonmajority backgrounds, to the patterns of mainstream U.S. culture. Basic knowledge about language and culture and how these systems can vary is fundamental to helping diverse students succeed in school.

Fillmore and Snow (2000) suggest that teachers should have knowledge of a number of topics regarding oral and written language, including the basic units of language, regular and irregular forms in English, vocabulary development, dialect regularity, academic English, language acquisition, the complexity of English spelling, patterns of rhetorical structure, quality and correctness in writing, and text comprehensibility. They suggest courses or course components that would allow teachers to learn essential information about language: language and linguistics, language and cultural diversity, sociolinguistics for educators in a linguistically diverse society, language development, second language teaching and learning, the language of academic discourse, and text analysis in educational settings.

Professional Development

What kinds of professional development experiences can help practicing teachers learn more about language and apply that knowledge to improving classroom practice? Clearly, short-term professional development experiences are inadequate: Teaching and learning are complex, and teachers need time to learn and experiment with new concepts in the classroom, just as their students do. Principles of effective teaching and learning for students extend to effective professional development for teachers (Rueda, 1998). To be successful, professional development must

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be long term, and it must incorporate opportunities for learning that center on teachers and students. Hawley and Valli (1999) suggest eight principles of effective professional development: It should be driven by an analysis of teachers' goals and student performance; it should involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn; it should be school based; it should be organized around collaborative problem solving; it should be continuous and adequately supported; it should be information rich; it should include opportunities for the development of theoretical understanding; and it should be part of a comprehensive change process. Because in-service teacher education on language in teaching and learning must address teachers' attitudes toward language and toward students who speak languages other than English and dialects other than Standard English, it calls for extensive commitments of time. Teachers need time to reflect on the meaning of education in a pluralistic society, on the relationships between teachers and learners, and on social attitudes about language and culture that affect students (Clair, 1998; Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 1997).

There are a number of professional development structures that can incorporate these principles, including teacher networks and collaboratives (Renyi, 1996), university–school partnerships (Darling-Hammond, 1994), action research groups (Check, 1997), and teacher study groups (Clair, 1998). What these structures have in common are opportunities for teachers to learn together in coherent and sustained ways.

Challenges for Improving Professional Development

Designing opportunities for teachers to learn about language must link three essential elements: principles of effective professional development, appropriate content, and skilled professional developers. Integrating these elements presents significant challenges. First, understandings of effective professional development have changed much faster than practice. Many professional development experiences continue to be short term and disconnected from the reality of teachers' work. Second, under pressure to raise test scores, administrators and other educators may have trouble understanding how knowledge about language will help students succeed in school. Finally, identifying qualified professional developers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to provide effective professional development on educational linguistics is daunting. These professionals need to have extensive knowledge about language and school reform and experience providing long-term professional development in schools. One way to overcome this challenge is teaming school personnel who provide professional development with university faculty or others with expertise in applied linguistics. Working together in schools, these teams can explore how language affects learning in particular contexts and build knowledge about language and education.

Conclusion

The demands of school reform and the changing face of the U.S. student population require that all teachers learn more about the role of language in teaching and learning. This knowledge can enhance their practice overall, improving their ability to teach literacy, and it can increase their effectiveness with students who speak languages other than English and dialects other than Standard English. Long-term professional development that views teacher and student learning as paramount must play a central role. The challenges are real but worth confronting, because high-quality education demands a well-educated teaching force.

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